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Chief Spy Likes Bar Telephone

It all started innocently enough with a form-letter invitation to William Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, asking him to meet with *The Post's* editorial board during his brief visit to Palm Beach County.

I hardly expected a reply, much less an acceptance. Figures of Casey's stature usually fly in, deliver their speeches at The Breakers or Society of Four Arts, then fly right back to Washington. And given the nature of the CIA, it didn't seem likely that the nation's chief spy would want to spend an hour answering questions from newspapermen.

So I wasn't surprised when I received a phone call from a CIA public relations man thanking me for the invitation but giving the chief's regrets.

What did surprise me was when the same P.R. man called back last weekend to inform me that Casey's plans had changed and he would, indeed, be able to meet with *The Post*. "Great," I said, "when will he be here?"

"I can't tell you that," he said. "We'll be in touch."

That was three days before Casey's Four Arts speech last Tuesday. Late Monday afternoon, I was summoned to the telephone. "Hold for William Casey," said a voice. The next voice I heard was Casey's unmistakable New York City brogue informing me that he would arrive at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday for a 30-minute conference that would be strictly off the record.

We chatted about the beautiful Florida weather and the fact that Casey had just finished a round of golf at Boca Rio. He allowed as how he had played poorly.

A CIA security man arrived during the lunch hour Tuesday to examine the conference room where our meeting was to be held. Then at precisely 4:10 p.m., two limousines pulled into the parking lot and Casey appeared, flanked by several trim and well-groomed bodyguards.

I opened the session by asking Casey about recent reports that the CIA was training Central American dissidents in Florida and other states. "You don't really expect me to answer that, do you?" was the reply.

I tried again with a query about possible changes in the CIA's methods after the agency's failure to warn us of the Iranian revolution. Casey responded that the CIA now monitored social, religious and economic developments in more than 20 countries rather than concentrating solely on military intelligence.

Most of the questions, however, got the standard "no comment" or "you'll have to wait and hear what the president has to say" response. Casey spoke in a barely audible voice, giving the impression that he might be trying to confound any recording devices. Of course, there weren't any.

About 15 minutes into the session, one of Casey's security men came into the room brand-

dishing a *Post* press card. He secretively flashed it to me and asked, "Does this man work for you and do you want him in the room?"

The card bore the photograph of reporter Edgar Sanchez, who had covered Casey's speech and was late getting back to the office. Sanchez is a native of El Salvador and the CIA obviously was taking no chances, particularly with a dark Latin male who claimed to be a reporter.

After I assured the man that Sanchez was authentic, Edgar was ushered into the room. Casey wouldn't answer his questions, either.

At exactly 5 p.m., Casey rose and said, "I told you I'd give you half an hour and it's been 45 minutes. I've got to go." We thanked him and shook hands all around.

The limousines pulled out of the parking lot, turned left on Dixie Highway and stopped in front of the seedy but much-loved El Cid Bar directly across Dixie from *The Post*. Two security men jumped out and entered the tavern.

In a few minutes they emerged and huddled with Casey. Then the CIA director, with two bodyguards in front and two behind, entered the Cid.

It would be somehow reassuring for me to report that the crusty superspy, in his three-piece suit, then bellied up to the bar and hoisted a cold one among the T-shirted and blue-jeaned El Cid clientele. But Casey didn't have liquid refreshment on his mind.

Instead, while his security men stood guard, Casey plunked a quarter into the Cid's telephone and placed a call to parts unknown. Then he was off to the airport for his flight back to Washington.

It's not yet known whether the management of the El Cid will place a brass plate on its phone to commemorate the day when America's No. 1 spy came in from the cold.